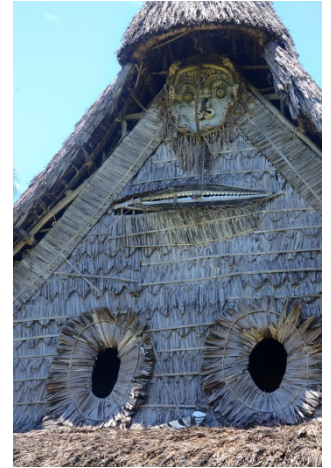


Day 5, Thursday Oct 16

We entered the Spirit House, which was similar to the others we had seen, but much, much bigger. It was two stories high. The posts were all carved and painted. And on the ledge where the men sit, they had put out masks and drums and all sorts of carvings for us to peruse.



A little more about spirit houses. The spirit house is not the same as the men's house, although they are similar. The spirit house is more specialized often having two stories and including sacred objects. It is believed that the ancestors' spirits live here. Although many of the Yetma tribe are now Catholics, they still try to hold on to some of their customs. In these villages, the men often hang out in the spirit house much of the day.

Traditional Sepik societies are male dominated. Men control the religious life of the community and produce carvings which are part of religious expression; women are not even allowed to see some of these religious carvings. Rather the women create the more secular functional items like necklaces and baskets.



The Sepik are known for creating war shields, gable masks which are put on the outside of houses. There are several language groups on the river and with each within each language group there's an underlying cultural unity but there are also differences between individuals and village groups within the same language group. The art carvings are often specific to the individual group, but there are recurring themes in the carvings such as birds like the Sea eagle and



crocodiles which represent spirit figures. Oversize penises represent male courage. Large heads represent human power.



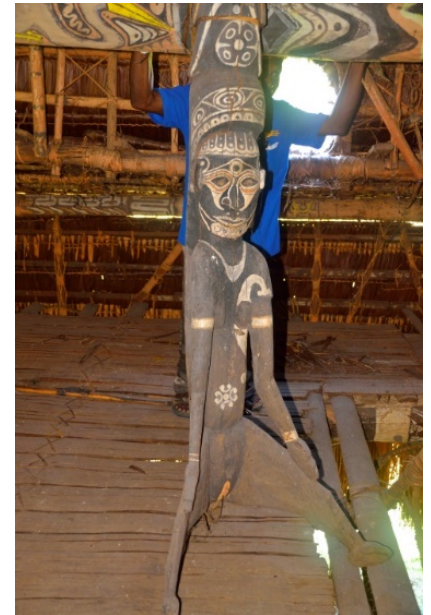
We climbed the steep ladder to the second level where we saw the statue of “mother” with her legs open (keep reading...) representing entering and leaving the womb. We saw a large crocodile head carving. In this spirit house, each group of carvers had their own little space to display their wares for us. We saw beautiful masks. I bought a few and met the men that had carved them. One looked like he was about 90 years old. And of course we bargained. The tradition here is to ask for the first price, then the second price, and sometimes even a third price. I was a good bargainer, often getting a third price.

But the main reason for visiting this village was to learn about the initiations which take place in this spirit house.

I already mentioned the importance of crocodiles in the Sepik region. Crocodiles feature prominently in the legends and rites of passage of various Sepik tribes. Stories may vary from village to village, but there is a shared belief in ancestral

ties to the crocodiles and a practice of ritual scarring, also called body cutting, of initiated men that emulates crocodile skin. Body cutting is the initiation rite for young boys entering into manhood. It is believed that men once gave birth to children, but the women stole that from them. When a child is born, he gets half the blood from his father and half from his mother. The mother’s blood is considered “weak blood” and in order to be a strong man, you have to get rid of the weak blood. There is also a story about a crocodile and its spirit and how that spirit enters the man through the cuts (like crocodile bites) and protects him.

In the spirit house there is always a carving of a woman giving birth to either crocodile or another animal. The animal is the clan totem. This is part of the initiation for boys as they are reborn as men during the ceremony.



The young boys, as young as 14 and as old as mid-thirties are initiated in groups of 10-20. They enter the Spirit House as if entering the womb again and getting ready to be reborn. There is figure of a woman giving birth. They spend 16 weeks (it was 16 months) isolated from the rest of the village in the Spirit House and during the time they are taught about how to be a man (what actually happens in the Spirit House during the initiation is secret, so we don’t actually know what they learn). We do know that they have to stay on the east side of the house as the west side is only for men. They have very strict rules that must be followed like no talking unless spoken to, eating only certain food and while facing the wall. If they have to urinate, they have to totally cover themselves so they can’t see the women and the women can’t see them. The group of boys are treated as a community; if one breaks a rule, all are punished. The punishment could be no food, spending a night in cold water, or being hit with bamboo.

Inside the Spirit House, the uncle, the mother’s brother, represents the mother’s side and does the final cutting. Parents decide if their son will be initiated; once committed there is no way out other than the death penalty. If a boy dies during the ceremony, it means he was too weak and not pure. In that situation, his clothes are folded and given to his mother, but his name is never mentioned again; he is wiped out. Men that are initiated, on the other hand, prove loyalty and the ability to suffer to their whole community and in that way they gain the respect; the right to marry; right to build their own house etc,

The day before the initiation rite they are kept up and walked through the forest, dunked in the cold water of the river and basically sleep deprived for 24 hours. The men play flutes and sing and dance (that is the ceremony we saw yesterday). The boys are placed on banana leaves and the cutting begins. Over 100 cuts are made and very elaborate designs are done. It used to be done with bamboo but today razor blades are used. After

the cutting is complete, the boys must use separate paths to keep away from menstruating woman (weakness could re-enter them) until they are healed. Oil from the jungle is used to control infection and the wounds are covered with white mud. The bigger the scar, the better. The design is determined by the mother's side of the clan.

Since skin cutting still exists in the Chandri tribe in this village of Wombun, we asked if we could meet some of the men who had been initiated. Two came to talk to us. For a few extra Kina (yes, we had to pay for these pictures), two men showed us their crocodile scars. I asked them if they remember that day. He told us he was 18 when he was initiated and remembered it well. But he said it with such pride. It is foreign and strange and barbaric to us. But it is their culture and their ritual. While this seems so barbaric to us, they were so very proud of their initiation rites.



We had asked to see the inside of one of the homes. We really had not intended to eat in their home when we asked; we just wanted to visit to see what it looked like. But we were invited to have our picnic lunch. Invited might not actually be true. The family (who I am sure got paid by the tour company) moved to one side and we sat on their bench and ate at their table. The mother and her children just sat watching us and it was very uncomfortable



But it was interesting to see the inside. We climbed up a steep ladder to get into their home which was one very, very large room. In one corner there was a stove and some shelves with pots. In the other corner were mattresses on the floor (not the kind we sleep on, but I couldn't tell what they were made of).

The women often sleep nearest the door so if they have to get up at night they don't disturb the men. And not climb over the men, especially when menstruating, as this would be bad luck. When girls have their first period, they are isolated for one week, then bathed. Then they are considered a woman. Much better than the initiation of the men!

There were small windows with no coverings and no air moved. So it was very hot and humid. And very dark. This is how they live, but this is all they know.

The mother was trying to put the baby to sleep, and was fanning him (her?). We felt awkward eating in front of them. And in the end, our guide gave them our leftovers. Civilization?



We wondered about schooling since we kept seeing children everywhere, and not in a classroom. Seems schooling is a part-time thing. They do have a school here and school begins at age 6 and often continues until grade 8. Those children, who pass their exams, go to high school which often becomes a boarding school as there are so few high schools and many villages.

After lunch it was time to say good-bye and head back to our canoe and back to the Sepik Spirit. It was a full day, a very interesting day, and a beautiful day. Tomorrow we leave the Sepik but I must say the river is one of the more beautiful places in the world and I hope I never forget that feeling of calm as we glided in our canoe, watching nature – the birds, the clouds, the trees, the sky, the sun, the sunrise and sunset, and the reflections. This is the beauty of whatever one calls it: nature, the spirits, God, or all of them.

Tomorrow we say good bye to the Sepik. One other thing we learned here is that after the Leahy brothers were here, Christian missionaries began coming to PNG beginning in 1934. The arrival of whites into the Sepik completely altered the dynamics of the local economy which had been based on the traditional currency of pigs and pearl shells. The missionaries brought large numbers of shells and with those they purchased labor i.e. slaves. This upset the traditional trade routes. Those villagers living close by became very wealthy while the rest became the new poor. We see and hear this over and over again here. The white man came and it was a mixed blessing.

